

Conservation and Sustainability in Historic Cities



Dennis Rodwell



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Chapter 10

The Challenge and the Opportunity

The purpose of this book

As set out in the Introduction, the purpose of this book is to contribute to the forging of linkages between architectural and urban *conservation* and the broader environmental agenda of *sustainability*.

By juxtaposing their separate origins, seeking to make coherent sense of the complex and sometimes contradictory theoretical backgrounds, and outlining their parallel evolution and development, the earlier chapters have sought to raise many of the issues, pose a number of questions, make some of the connections, and suggest favourable directions.

The various and diverse examples of practice, from the scale of the individual building through to the metropolitan city, are all intended to insinuate real-life challenges and opportunities into what would otherwise be an essentially philosophical treatise. These examples exhibit widely different methodologies – even within the same cities over relatively short spans of time. All of which serves to confirm that inclusive rather than exclusive approaches are needed: in the definition of the challenges; in the appraisal of the options; and in the evolving focus of debates and resolutions. Change, after all, is the one constant in cities.

The challenge

Sustainable world

Cities around the world occupy a fiftieth of its land surface, house fifty per cent of its population, and account for seventy-five per cent of its annual consumption of natural resources and discharge of wastes. A significant proportion of those material and energy resources are non-renewable, reusable materials are being wasted and not recycled, and toxic wastes are polluting the oceans and the atmosphere.

The city is one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century. It is the starting point for a sustainable world.

Sustainable cities

To meet this challenge, principles of ecological sustainability need to be insinuated into all aspects of urban planning, from the global down to the local scale. At the theoretical forefront is the concept that cities should be regarded and managed as ecosystems: mini-ecosystems within their individual localities; and interrelated ecosystems globally. A key part of this is the recovery of natural cycles of resource use and waste management.

Pre-industrial cities offer models of sustainable urban development, functioning as they did in a balanced ecological relationship within their sub-regions. The challenge is to recover the over-riding principle of balance in an industrialised world in the age of globalisation.

Historic cities

Sustainability has three components – environmental, social, and economic – of which the environmental takes precedence as it underscores the survival of all life forms on our planet.

Historic cities start with two essential qualities: first, the environmental capital that is represented by their buildings and urban infrastructure; and second, the socio-cultural values that they signify and the role that these perform in defining sense of place, community belonging and social cohesion. These socio-cultural values are represented by a continuous time line: past, present and future. They are expressed in the architecture, the urban grain, and the socio-economic organisation of cities.

The physical and societal attributes of historic cities are inseparable. They embrace environmental issues, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and equity both within and between generations. Recognising and acting upon the full range of values inherent in historic cities is a core component of the challenge.

Architectural and urban conservation

Writing in 1975, European Architectural Heritage Year, the perception of several leading conservation architects was simple: that the starting point in a historic city must be its historic quality and visual character not – as one writer put it – ‘secondary social, economic or even ecological arguments’. Also, adopting a perfectionist urban design approach, that: ‘The first principle of conservation is to keep the good parts of cities and rebuild the bad parts’. Such attitudes are reflected, for example, in the 2005 management plan for the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site.

Writing on the eve of the new millennium in 1999, Jukka Jokilehto, formerly with the International Centre for Conservation in Rome (ICCROM), now consultant to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), asks ‘if the conservation movement, as it evolved from the eighteenth century, cannot be considered as concluded, and whether modern

conservation should not be redefined in reference to the environmental sustainability of social and economic development within the overall cultural and ecological situation on earth'. That redefinition has yet to be advanced.

Some current issues

This section focuses on some key issues and connections. It draws together several of the threads but does not aim to be exhaustive.

The concept of heritage and its role today

The construct of *heritage* as something that relates to tangible objects from the past which we may add to today by constructing the monuments of the future – characterised frequently as *iconic* buildings – needs to be substituted by an anthropological vision: a dynamic approach that is focused on processes that safeguard geocultural identity and secure its continuity. These processes embrace all expressions of interaction between the physical environment and human activity.

In relation to architectural conservation, these include training and continuity of employment opportunities in traditional craft skills in locations where demand for their services is – whether actually or potentially – concentrated. These employment opportunities can only be secured through effective policies and coordinated urban management, both of which are currently lacking.

In this, the encompassing term *historic environment* is a start, that of *cultural landscape* more helpful, and wider recognition of the inseparable relationships between tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the continuous past-present-future time line imperative.

The fact that over half the annual turnover in the United Kingdom construction industry relates to repair and maintenance work points the way to consolidating the role of conservation as a mainstream rather than a marginal activity.

Functional, material and cultural resource

The essential difference between architecture and art forms such as painting and sculpture is that buildings exist to perform a function, the range and nature of which vary enormously according to time and place, and human desires and needs both temporal and spiritual. Architecture is about creating three-dimensional spaces and enclosures within which internal and external activities may be performed – be they ceremonial, religious, educational, commercial, domestic, or simply passing the time of day. The issues of architectural style and detail, degree of ostentation or humility, are variables that contribute to defining geocultural identity. The underlying principle of functionality is invariable. The history of architecture is the history of building construction and human use.

Establishing continuity of function is the *sine qua non* of successful architectural and urban conservation, and the principle of minimum intervention to fabric and community alike favours uses for buildings individually and historic areas collectively that relate as closely as possible to those for which those buildings and areas were constructed (Figure 10.1). Minimum intervention is a principle that is shared by *conservation* and *sustainability*.

Historic buildings and areas represent a non-renewable capital resource – of materials, energy, and financial investment – as well as a cultural one. As the editor of the *Architectural Review* wrote as long ago as 1970: 'It is the mark of an immature culture – a demonstration of a childish attitude to valuable and historic buildings – to assume that if new accommodation is required . . . it can only be provided by demolishing . . . and rebuilding on the same site'.

At the scale of the historic city, continuing resource value is nowhere more apparent than across Central and Eastern Europe, where absence of redevelopment policies kept them very largely intact throughout the socialist period.

The strategic approach

The strategic approach that is demonstrated in cities such as Chartres and Paris is essentially a bottom-up approach that starts with what exists and

Figure 10.1 Facadism is technically complex, financially expensive, and constitutes a form of architectural taxidermy that treats historic cities as theatrical stage sets. It symbolises a failure to establish continuity of function and is the antithesis of a sustainable approach to historic cities. (Glasgow, Scotland.)



seeks to make it work in the modern world. It is the principle promoted by Gustavo Giovannoni of recognising multiple values, avoiding destructive superimposition, and welcoming harmonious coexistence.

At the metropolitan scale of Paris it changed a monocentric city into a polycentric one. This is the model that is favoured in the debate on sustainable cities. It offers the opportunity to establish or consolidate neighbourhoods of proximity, balance land values and transport movements, and enables freedom of architectural expression in locations that avoid conflict. The juxtaposition of La Grande Arche at La Défense and the Place des Vosges in the Marais quarter on the front cover of this book expresses this freedom of expression and counterbalancing avoidance of conflict.

It is illogical and confrontational to concentrate the most volatile commercial uses and development pressures of a modern city in its oldest and most environmentally sensitive areas. Yet, in Britain, this is precisely what we continue to do, thereby monotonising them and providing models for destructive redevelopment that seriously threaten cities such as St Petersburg, one of the best-preserved major cities of Central and Eastern Europe. Such confrontation is the antithesis of sustainable development.

Urban landscape

The integrity of a historic city's urban landscape defines its over-arching geocultural identity to citizens and visitors alike. In recent years UNESCO has been at the forefront of debates over the intrusion of high-rise construction into urban landscapes and the failure that they signify of acceptable relationships between new development and the historic environment.

UNESCO has successfully opposed high-rise development schemes for Cologne (Germany), Vienna (Austria) and Esfahan (Iran), and engaged in ongoing debate over the skyline of the City of London.

France benefits from a national protective measure that encompasses urban landscapes. No such measure exists in the United Kingdom.

Contemporary architecture and the role of architects

Just as *heritage* is a construct so is *contemporary* in the sense that is used in relation to architecture today. Etymologically the word has a double meaning: first, occurring at the present time; and second, conforming to modern ideas in style or fashion. The first goes without saying and has no preconditions attached to it. The second is less evident, especially in a pluralist society. Is there an arbiter? Is *contemporary* an inclusive concept or a recipe for confrontation?

The sequence of conservation charters outlined in Chapter 1 illustrates a variety of attempts to position conservation in relation to the Modern Movement in architecture – especially at the time of the latter's aggressive infancy, from the early-1930s. The debate in relation to historic cities is

The essence of good urban design

'The agreement to differ within a recognised tolerance of behaviour'

Geocultural identity and sense of place are rudely interrupted when modern buildings are intolerant of their neighbours and confront them abrasively (Figures 10.2 and 10.3).



Figure 10.2 Moscow, Russia. A bland high-rise block towers over a quarter of the city that is comprised predominantly of low-rise villas.



Figure 10.3 Helsinki, Finland. The white Italian marble of the rectilinear elevations of a company headquarters (built 1960–62; Alvar Aalto, architect) snubs the revivalist architecture of its neighbouring late-nineteenth-century church.

Urban landscape and geocultural identity

The post-Second World War reconstruction of Nuremberg, Germany

Nuremberg was all but destroyed by aerial bombardment. Its post-War rebuilding sought to recover key aspects of its socio-cultural identity: through its urban landscape, the restoration of major monuments, and the reconstruction of the historic core as a mixed use community (Figures 10.4–10.6).



Figure 10.4 (left)

Nuremberg, Germany. The historic urban landscape was reinstated in the post-War rebuilding of the city.



Figure 10.5 (below left) Major monuments were restored and new buildings constructed alongside.



Figure 10.6 (below) The historic street pattern and mix of uses were recovered, and the new buildings were designed to offer contextual continuity rather than historical replication.



Figure 10.7 Kutná Hora, Czech Republic: the former Jesuit College. A high level of creativity and skill is needed in order to work with as opposed to against historic building complexes where there is no longer a demand for their original use. There is a shortfall of creative skills in minimum intervention within the construction professions.

unresolved, and there is no 'agreement to differ within a recognised tolerance of behaviour' (see page 21).

Architecture exists to perform a function of internal and external enclosure. It is also a civic art. Part of the problem today is that the architectural profession is divided into three distinct classes: modernists, revivalists and conservationists. Notwithstanding that the word *architect* simply means *master builder*, the first of the three categories consider themselves the elite, the second are dismissed as practitioners of pastiche, and the third are sometimes not appreciated as architects at all. It is an unnecessary debate, fuelled by insecurity and intolerance, and by an absence of effective strategic urban planning that would provide non-confrontational outlets for all practitioners to play their parts in harmony – with each other as well as with society. Gustavo Giovannoni expressed very clearly the need for architects to have an integrated training: for them to be true *master builders*.

Architects have a key role to play in the conservation and sustainable development of historic cities, and there is an urgent need to address an inclusive profession (Figure 10.7).

Architectural conservation

Sir John Smith, founder of the Landmark Trust – which has restored a considerable number of historic properties across the United Kingdom and beyond – wrote in 1992 of the 'heresy which afflicts old buildings increasingly . . . caused by the growth in the number of archaeologists. . . . Good buildings . . . are not archaeological sites, at least until they are ruins, and not

Creative continuity in architecture



Figure 10.8 Pulteney Bridge, Bath, England, was designed in neoclassical style by Robert Adam and completed in 1774. Lined with shops on both sides, it is supported on three elegant arches and features a central Venetian window.



Figure 10.9 Culzean Castle, Scotland, a mansion house designed by Robert Adam in a castellated, baronial manner externally; its neoclassical interiors include an oval-plan staircase (built 1777–90). Culzean Castle is now owned and administered as a visitor attraction by the National Trust for Scotland.

All creative work is derivative directly or indirectly of something, somewhere.

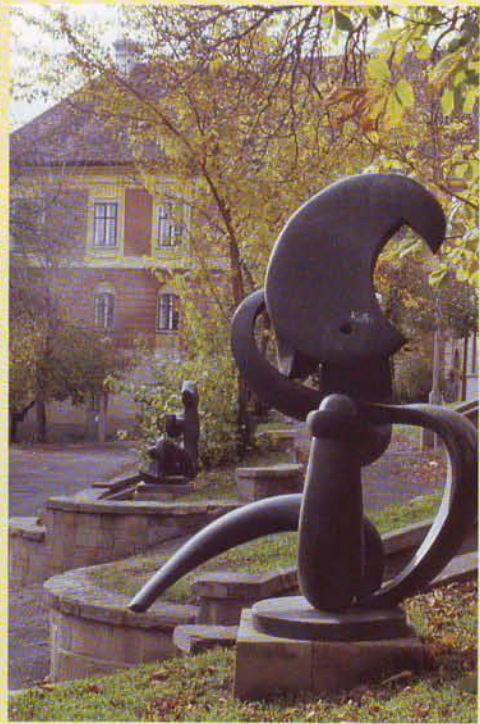
The Italian Renaissance recognized classical antiquity as a springboard for creative continuity. Today, references to historical styles in architecture are dismissed by some as *pastiche*, a term that is used in a derogatory sense as the antithesis of *contemporary*.

Was the Scots-born eighteenth-century architect Robert Adam (1728–92), equally adept in neoclassical, Gothic, picturesque and castle styles simply an architect of pastiche or a skilled and creative manipulator of form, construction and detail? (Figures 10.8 and 10.9.)

Was the Russian architect Alexander Schusev (1873–1949), practising in Moscow in the early-twentieth century in diverse styles – including Novgorodian Medieval, Art Nouveau, Russian and Tartar Revivalism, Neoclassicism and Constructivism – and whose works include the revivalist Kazan railway station (opened 1912) and the modernist Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square (completed 1930), a contemporary architect or a man of multiple pastiche?

Both Robert Adam and Alexander Schusev lived in places and during times in which an inclusive approach to creative continuity in architecture was recognised and respected.

It is a contrived debate, one that is essentially a product of intolerant twentieth-century modernism (Figures 10.10 and 10.11).



Figures 10.10 and 10.11 Pécs, Hungary, is noted for numerous small-scale contemporary interventions within its historic centre and for its many figurative and abstract sculptures in the public domain.

Contemporary architecture and the obsession with design

Contemporary building design is often perceived to substitute novelty for creativity in a self-conscious attempt to shock and attract attention.

Speaking in Edinburgh in September 2006, Francesco Bandarin, director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, spoke of a 'dangerous attitude, ... a growing gap between what architects want to do – and *maybe* their clients too – and what citizens want'. He referred to 'architecture seen as an object with a design, the artistic achievement of the architect, ... as something that demands to be seen', and of architects who are 'looking in the wrong direction: inwards to themselves, not outwards to the urban contexts in which they are building'.

Likening its appearance to a petrochemical factory, Bandarin identified the Georges-Pompidou Centre in Paris (see Figure 6.9 at page 123) as having initiated the present mould. He referred also to the Kunsthaus at Graz in Austria (completed in 2003, it is variously nicknamed the 'friendly alien' and the 'inflatable pigskin'; Peter Cook, architect) and the glittering shroud that envelopes the proposed extension to the neoclassical Marinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, Russia. He suggested that the best place for such buildings is at airports, well outside historic city centres.

On the positive side, I M Pei's pyramid in the forecourt of the Louvre, Paris, and Norman Foster's Carré d'Art that neighbours Maison Carrée, the Roman temple at Nîmes in the south of France, were applauded as 'brilliant solutions' for their self-effacing simplicity and elegance, ones that respond positively to the need for architectural continuity in historic cities (Figure 10.12).

The focus on design rather than on people and coordinated urban management has narrowed the appeal and the potential of the *Urban Renaissance* in Britain. As John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister, colourfully put it: 'Architects think if they are not on board, it's a lousy design. All that's professional crap'.



Figure 10.12 Paris, France. The Pyramid in the forecourt of the Louvre (completed 1989; Ieoh Ming Pei, architect). The form of the pyramid is of course closely associated with structures from Ancient Egypt.

always even then . . . Buildings are increasingly to be treated as documents, to be preserved for study, not as visual objects at all, and not for use'.

Fundamentalist attitudes to conservation charters and their like are commonplace. They do not communicate well to a generalist audience and frequently excite confrontation with building owners and users.

The philosophy and practical models of architectural conservation have a great deal to offer as contributions to sustainability. These contributions include safeguarding local distinctiveness; the reuse of buildings and the recycling of materials; the use of locally sourced building materials and craft skills; economical solutions based on an understanding of the environmental performance of historic structures; and the principle of minimum intervention.

Focusing on human and practical issues with which the non-academic, non-professional audience can identify, and relating these directly to the '3 Es' of sustainability and the '3 Rs' of non-renewable resource and waste management, underpins the response to Jukka Jokilehto's call for conservation to be redefined.

The opportunity

Just as architectural conservation has evolved from the eighteenth century, so has modern town planning from the nineteenth, and urban conservation from the twentieth. We have all moved on, and debates in future will increasingly focus on environmental issues under the umbrella concept of sustainability.

Academic criteria that address cultural significance from a narrow perspective, that are then not interpreted into policies that safeguard identity of place and local distinctiveness, and that fail to position conservation as a central activity in the public mind and within the construction professions and industry, neglect to respond effectively to the expectations of international agendas in either *conservation* or *sustainability*.

Civil society is enthused about *heritage*. It is extensively and progressively involved in the saving and restoration of individual buildings and building types. In the past it has successfully campaigned against and drawn a line under large-scale programmes of clearance and superimposed redevelopment in historic cities.

Today's challenges in the United Kingdom are principally longer term. The historic centres of many cities have three primary – if not exclusive – functions: employment and retail by day; entertainment by night. They remain largely deserted of resident populations, and sanitised of small-scale independent retailers, artisan-type workshops, and other traditional and localised activities.

The – as opposed to an – *Urban Renaissance* is a long way off. The interdisciplinary, cross-sector management skills are not in place. There are shortages of relevant skills in urban planning, architecture and conservation.

There is an absence of focus on people and an excess of focus on archaeological and design approaches to buildings and cities as physical objects.

The opportunity that now arises may be summarised as follows:

- to redefine *conservation* to make it relevant to *sustainability*;
- to reverse the anti-urban legacy and redefine the city to make it relevant to citizens as a place in which to live as well as to work, shop and play;
- to adopt a resource management approach in which material and cultural resource values act as mutually supportive partners;
- to progressively reorder existing, historic cities for a sustainable future, recognising and safeguarding all of the tangible and intangible cultural values that are associated with them; and
- to address the urban conservation challenge holistically and position *conservation* as a determining factor in *sustainable development*.

In the United Kingdom there is much lost ground to be made up. Elsewhere in the world, especially in emerging and developing economies, there is an urgent need to avoid replicating non-sustainable theoretical and practical models.